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Groups of countries in special situations: Third United Nations Conference for Least Developed Countries

Outline of the modalities of the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries and its preparatory process

Note by the Secretary-General

Summary

The present note is submitted pursuant to resolution 62/203, in which the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to prepare a note during the sixty-second session of the Assembly outlining the modalities of a fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, including its preparatory process. The note outlines the modalities of holding the Conference, including its preparatory process, in accordance with the resolution.

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly in its resolution 62/203 recalled paragraph 114 of the Programme of Action on holding a fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries towards the end of the current decade, and requested the Secretary-General, in that regard, to prepare a note during the sixty-second session of the Assembly outlining the modalities of such a conference, including its preparatory process.

2. The present note outlines the modalities of holding the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, including its preparatory process, in accordance with resolution 62/203.

II. Background and mandate

3. In 1971, the international community recognized the existence of a category of countries whose distinctness lay not only in the profound poverty of their people, but also in the structural weakness of their economic, institutional and human resources, often compounded by geographical handicaps. That group of countries (then numbering 25), classified by the United Nations as least developed countries, constitute the poorest and weakest segment of the international community, and their economic and social development represent a major challenge both for them and for their development partners.

4. To respond to that challenge, the General Assembly decided to hold the First United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries in Paris in 1981. To continue focus on the need for the special measures for those countries, the Assembly decided to convene the Second United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries. Its outcome was embodied in the Paris Declaration and Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the 1990s. Despite vigorous efforts by the least developed countries to implement socio-economic reforms as envisaged by the Programme of Action, those countries as a group were not able to meet any of the objectives of the Programme of Action, and their number increased from 42 in 1990 to 48 in 1997.

5. Consequently, in accordance with General Assembly resolutions 52/187 and 53/182, the Third United Nations Conference for the Least Developed Countries was held in Brussels from 14 to 20 May 2001. Its outcome was embodied in the Brussels Declaration and the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010.

6. The Programme of Action for 2001-2010, endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 55/279, represents a results-oriented comprehensive poverty reduction strategy, tailored to the special needs of the least developed countries and designed as a framework for partnership between those countries and their development partners in seven interlinked areas: (a) fostering a people-centred policy framework; (b) good governance at the national and international levels; (c) building human and institutional capacities; (d) building productive capacities to make globalization work for the least developed countries; (e) enhancing the role of trade in development; (f) reducing vulnerability of protecting the environment; and (g) mobilizing financial resources.

7. The Programme covers all areas (economic, social and environmental) of development and has 10 cross-cutting priority issues: poverty eradication, gender equality, employment, governance at the national and international levels, capacity-building, sustainable development, special problems of landlocked and small island developing States, and challenges faced by least developed countries affected by conflict.

8. The overarching goal of the Programme is "to make substantial progress towards halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty and suffering from hunger by 2015 and promote the sustainable development" of the least developed countries. The Programme of Action contains 30 internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration.

9. The implementation of the Programme of Action is guided by the following principles: (a) an integrated approach; (b) genuine partnership; (c) country ownership; (d) market considerations; and (e) result orientation.

10. Furthermore, the Programme provided a clear implementation and monitoring mechanism at the national, regional and global levels.

11. In that context, the General Assembly at its fifty-sixth session decided to establish the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, with the functions recommended in the Secretary-General's report.[1]

12. In 2006, the General Assembly at its sixty-first session, held the High-level Meeting on the Mid-Term Comprehensive Global Review of the Programme of Action. The Meeting concluded that the socio-economic situation in the least developed countries remains precarious and — given the current trends — they were unlikely to achieve the objectives, goals and targets of the Programme.

III. Constraints

13. Since 2000, the least developed countries, as a group, grew by 6 per cent per year on average. However, impressive economic growth has made little dent on poverty and even deepened social disparities, especially between rural and urban areas, in those countries. Furthermore, fast population growth combined with rapid urbanization has led to a situation in which more people than ever have been seeking jobs outside agriculture while agricultural productivity has been declining. Malnutrition has been increasing, particularly in African least developed countries. Health and education indicators in many least developed countries have been improving steadily since 1990, but earlier progress on water and sanitation has not been sustained and has even been reversed in some of those countries.

14. Despite a significant increase in volume, official development assistance (ODA) as a percentage of donors' gross national income to least developed countries remains far below the 0.15-0.20 per cent target and foreign direct investment is highly concentrated in a few least developed countries rich in natural resources. Duty-free and quota-free market access has not resulted in an increase of the share of least developed countries exports and imports in world trade, which remain marginal at less than 1 per cent. Nearly 75 per cent of exports of those countries are

[1] A/56/645 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1 and 2.

still primary commodities, exposing them to multiple external shocks and volatile global market prices. Due to the 100 per cent debt cancellation under the Multilateral Debt Relief initiative, debt relief delivered under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative and stronger exports, debt service payments of least developed countries have decreased significantly but the long-term sustainability of debt burden remains a daunting challenge.

15. One least developed country (Cape Verde) graduated as of 21 December 2007 and two least developed countries will graduate from the list of those countries in 2010 (Samoa) and 2011 (Maldives). However, all graduating countries are small island developing States, extremely vulnerable in their development and highly susceptible to external shocks.

16. In the meantime, new challenges to the sustainable development of least developed countries have been also emerging: (a) high food prices, as a result of growing demand owing to population growth, high global oil prices, increased demand for bio-fuel, a shift to meat in diets of emerging economies and crop failure in major producing countries; (b) increase of the economically active age population lacking employment opportunities; (c) the impact of climate change owing to global warming, caused by the greenhouse gas emissions; (d) brain drain as a result of migration of skilled workers to developed and developing countries; (e) the threat of the avian flu; among other challenges.

17. Attaining the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals and addressing the challenges of poverty reduction and sustainable development depend crucially on sustaining the progress achieved and preventing the reversal of positive trends in least developed countries, the major locus of extreme poverty in the world.

IV. Proposed substantive agenda of the Conference

18. The Conference would convene to assess the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010 and to formulate new strategies and an action plan for sustainable development of least developed countries in the next decade. An analysis of past performance will shed light on the most critical constraints on the effective realization of the goals of the previous programmes of action and suggest new strategies to reverse them. While the range of issues to be addressed by the Conference will be determined by a consultative process among different stakeholders, it may be useful to recall a number of constraints which are known to have limited the performance of those countries.

19. The Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, inter alia, should:

(a) Assess the implementation of the Programme of Action during the first decade of the twenty-first century towards halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty and suffering from hunger and promoting the sustainable and steady increases in gross domestic product growth rates in least developed countries;

(b) Review the implementation of international support measures, particularly in the areas of official development assistance, debt, investment and trade;

(c) Consider the formulation and adoption of appropriate national and international policies and measures for the sustainable development of the least developed countries and their progressive integration into the world economy.

20. The Fourth Conference will provide a unique opportunity: (a) to undertake the comprehensive appraisal of the implementation of the Brussels Programme; (b) to share lessons learned and best practices; (c) to identify effective international and domestic policies in the light of the outcomes of the appraisals; (d) to agree on additional international support measures in favour of least developed countries; (e) to enhance partnerships between all stakeholders (Governments, parliaments, civil society, private sector, international and regional organizations and financial institutions) of the process at all levels; (f) to reaffirm the commitment to poverty eradication and sustainable development in least developed countries; (g) to reaffirm the global commitment to address the special needs of the least developed countries made at the major United Nations conferences and summits, including the Millennium Summit and the 2005 World Summit; (h) to mobilize international support and action; and (i) to identify new and emerging challenges and opportunities for the least developed countries, and means to address them.

V. Organizational strategy

21. A starting point in charting out an organizational strategy for the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries lies in the recognition and acceptance of the following premises:

(a) That the international community continues to be committed to the eradication of poverty and the improvement of the quality of lives of people in least developed countries.

(b) That, while the substantive agenda is broad, because the Conference is about the overall sustainable development of least developed countries, there is nevertheless a need to identify critical areas and set priorities and to invest efforts and resources in addressing them.

(c) That, in order to take into account the specific characteristics and problems of each least developed country within the framework of a broad agenda, a global programme of action needs to be based on country-level assessments of constraints, priorities and opportunities. For this reason, an extensive preparatory process at the country level, involving the public and private sectors and civil society, is essential to formulating a national-level comprehensive programme of action for each country. That would become the basis for developing a global programme of action to be adopted at the Conference.

(d) That the issue of resources for the implementation of the new comprehensive programme of action for the sustainable development of least developed countries is the major challenge, and that new approaches for mobilizing development finance need to be found.

VI. Preparatory process at the country, regional and global levels

22. The whole preparatory process for the Conference should be inclusive and transparent, to promote dialogue between all stakeholders (governments, civil society, particularly women groups and women non-governmental organizations, youth, the private sector, philanthropic and non-profit organizations, parliamentarians, academia, media, business leaders) of the process, establish linkages and ensure synergies at all levels and tracks of the preparatory process. To that end, various multi-stakeholder events are also highly encouraged.

A. Country-level preparations

23. National preparations will build on the existing country review processes, to avoid duplication and ensure United Nations system coordination at the country level. They will also take into account the recent stocktaking exercise in preparation for the Millennium Development Goals-based national development strategies, undertaken by most of the least developed countries, with the support of the United Nations resident coordinators, as well as the national reviews held within the framework of the annual ministerial reviews during the high-level segments of substantive sessions of the Economic and Social Council. Synergies must be established, at the country level, between the review of the implementation of the Brussels Programme and the review of the implementation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) and the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP), as well as between existing country review mechanisms, such as the UNDP round tables, the World Bank Consultative Groups, and others.

24. The following objectives, documentation, organizers, format and timing pertain to country-level preparations:

(a) **Objectives**: (i) in-depth and comprehensive assessment of the social, economic and environmental development of each country; (ii) evaluation of the progress of the country and its development partners on the goals, the targets and the commitments contained in the Programme of Action; (iii) thorough assessment of the effectiveness of the existing national arrangements[2] for the follow-up to, implementation of, and monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the Programme of Action; (iv) identification of the gaps, constraints and obstacles in the implementation of the Programme, as well as the country-specific needs in development; (v) formulation of additional policies and measures to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development; (vi) strengthening partnerships, including with parliaments, civil society and the private sector; (vii) review of the results of the international support measures, particularly in the areas of ODA, debt, investment and trade; and (viii) providing an input to the regional and global preparatory process.

(b) **Documentation**: national reports[3] of the least developed countries.

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[2] For national arrangements, see paras. 99-104 of the Programme of Action of the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010 (A/CONF/191/13).

[3] The national report will be prepared with the assistance of the United Nations resident coordinator.

(c) **Organizer**: each least developed country, with the support of the United Nations resident coordinator and the World Bank representative.

(d) **Format**: a national forum based on the broad-based and inclusive dialogue with all stakeholders of the development process (Governments, civil society, particularly women groups and women non-governmental organizations, youth, the private sector, philanthropic and non-profit organizations, parliamentarians, academia, media, business leaders).

(e) **Timing**: end 2009/early 2010.

B. Regional preparations

25. Regional preparations should bring the regional perspective into the review process. Given their responsibility for regional integration and regional cooperation, as well as for support to the sustainable development of countries of the region and the unique mandate for the analytical, normative and operational activities, the United Nations regional commissions will take a lead role in the preparatory process. Synergy should be established, during the review process, with the global review processes such as Millennium Development Goals and regional review mechanisms, such as the Africa Peer Review mechanism for the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

26. The following pertain to regional preparations:

(a) **Objectives**: (i) in-depth and comprehensive assessment of the implementation of the Programme in the region; (ii) thorough assessment of the effectiveness of the existing regional arrangements[4] for the follow-up to, implementation of, and monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the Programme of Action; (iii) exchange of experience, lessons learned and best practices; (iv) identification of common problems and seeking solutions; (v) formulation of specific policies and measures for better regional integration of least developed countries; (vi) promotion of cooperation between least developed countries and other countries; (vii) promotion of policy coherence at the regional level; (viii) strengthening partnerships, including civil society and the private sector; (ix) review of the results of the international support measures, particularly in the areas of ODA, debt, investment and trade; and (x) providing an input to the global preparations.

(b) **Documentation**: national reports of the least developed countries, annotated agenda, work programme, reports of the regional commissions and reports of the governing bodies of the regional commissions.

(c) **Organizer**: under the overall coordination and guidance of the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, the Economic Commission for Africa for the least developed countries in Africa, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific for the least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific, the Economic Commission for Western Asia for Yemen, and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean for Haiti, in collaboration with the relevant United Nations system organizations and other relevant international and regional

[4] For regional arrangements, see paras. 105-108 of the Programme.

organizations, including UNCTAD, UNDP, the World Bank, the regional development banks and regional economic communities.

(d) **Format**: high-level meetings with the participation of all stakeholders (government, civil society, particularly women groups and women non-governmental organizations, youth, the private sector, philanthropic and non-profit organizations, parliamentarians, academia, media, business leaders).

(e) **Timing**: Spring 2010/mid-2010.

C. Global-level preparations

27. The global preparatory process will build, to the extent possible, on the reviews of other major United Nations conferences and stocktaking exercises taking place between 2008 and 2010, and their relevant outcomes. To that end, the United Nations Secretariat will map out all major reviews between 2008 and 2010 and prepare a road map, a comprehensive list of all preparatory events in the lead-up to the Fourth Conference.

28. The following pertain to the global level:

(a) **Objectives**: (i) comprehensive appraisal of the implementation of the Programme and the effectiveness of existing arrangements at the global level;[5] (ii) review of the results of the international support measures, particularly in the areas of ODA, debt, investment and trade; (iii) formulation of the appropriate additional policies and measures to achieve sustainable development of the least developed countries and their better integration into the global economy; (iv) exchange of experience, lessons learned and best practices; (v) strengthening partnerships, including civil society and the private sector; (vi) preparation of a proposal for consideration and subsequent adoption by the Conference.

(b) **Organizer**: Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, in collaboration with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the United Nations Development Programme.

(c) **Documentation**: annotated agenda, national reports of the least developed countries, and reports of the regional review meetings, including their outcome documents, the comprehensive report of the Secretary-General, outcomes of the major United Nations global conferences and the outcomes of their respective reviews.

(d) **Structure**:

(i) United Nations system track: inter-agency consultative group meetings with a view to building consensus on the conceptual framework and all organizational aspects of the preparatory process and of the Conference.

(ii) Intergovernmental track: Preparatory Committee (two sessions, five days each) to undertake the comprehensive appraisal of the implementation of the Programme and prepare the proposal for the outcome document for consideration and adoption by the Conference.

[5] For global arrangements, see paras. 109-116 of the Programme.

The intergovernmental track will also include the meetings of the General Assembly sessions and the substantive sessions of the Economic and Social Council, which undertake the regular reviews of the implementation of the Programme, as well as the meetings of the governing bodies of the United Nations system and the international organizations, in particular, those of the UNCTAD Trade and Development Board and the WTO Sub-Committee on Least Developed Countries, which undertake the reviews of the implementation of the Programme in the areas of their competence, and special events. This track will also include a dialogue with the Bretton Woods institutions. The deliverables of all meetings will be made available to the Preparatory Committee.

(iii) Civil society track: a series of events with civil society and the private sector, including the Investment Forum and the Business Advisory Council, the meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as well as multi-stakeholder events, to explore and initiate innovative solutions to the problems of the Least Developed Countries, as well as to strengthen partnerships between Governments, civil society and the private sector. Summaries of the events will also be made available to the Preparatory Committee.

(e) **Format**: senior level.

(f) **Timing**: second half of 2010 — early-2011.

VII. Conference

29. The following are foreseen for the Conference:

(a) **Objective**: to undertake a comprehensive appraisal of the implementation of the Programme and formulate and adopt appropriate national and international policies and measures for the sustainable development of the least developed countries and their progressive integration into the world economy, and address new and emerging challenges and opportunities.

(b) **Intergovernmental track**:

(i) Plenary meetings. The inaugural meeting on the morning of the first day followed by the general debates. The general debates begin immediately after the inaugural meeting and will continue on the second day. The general debate will be followed by six interactive thematic discussions. The closing meeting will take place in the afternoon on the final day of the Conference, at which it will consider and adopt the proposal of the Committee of the Whole.

(ii) The Committee of the Whole will begin its work on the second day and end its work on a day before the closing of the Conference. It will examine and finalize the draft proposal of the Preparatory Committee for adoption by the Conference.

(iii) Documentation: (i) annotated agenda; (ii) rules of procedure; (iii) national reports of the least developed countries; (iv) reports of the regional high-level meetings; (v) reports of United Nations system bodies and international organizations; (vi) summaries of thematic discussions; (vii) summaries of the dialogue with the Bretton Woods institutions, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Investment Forum and the Business Advisory

Council; (viii) summary of the Civil Society Forum; (ix) report of the Preparatory Committee; (x) report of the Credentials Committee; (xi) report of the Committee of the Whole; (xii) summary of the Non-Governmental Organization forum; (xiii) issue papers; (xiv) the comprehensive report of the Secretary-General; and (xv) outcomes of the major United Nations global conferences and the outcomes of their respective reviews.

(c) **Civil society track**: The Civil Society Forum will be organized for the civil society, non-governmental organizations and the private sector and run parallel to the Committee of the Whole. It will consist of a series of round tables with a view to achieving consensus among all stakeholders on the outcome of the Conference. A separate private sector high-level round table leading to the announcement of new partnerships and a declaration of commitment from non-State actors towards reaching the Millennium Development Goals will also be organized. The discussion will be summarized submitted to the Secretary-General of the Conference, for inclusion in its report. The summary will also provide the basis of media and advocacy campaigns, and to global processes around the Millennium Development Goals.

(d) **Format of the Conference**: high level.

(e) **Timing**: mid-2011.

(f) **Duration**: 7 days.

(g) **Venue**: The Government of Turkey has offered to host the Conference in Istanbul, and the Government of Austria has offered to host the Conference in Vienna.

VIII. Recommendations and conclusions

30. **In order to launch timely preparations, the General Assembly should decide at its sixty-third session on convening the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, including its specific dates and venue.**

31. **I have decided, in accordance with the mandate given by the General Assembly in its resolutions 56/227 and 57/270 B, that the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States will serve as the focal point for the preparatory process for the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries.**

32. **I will designate the Secretary-General of the Conference upon the relevant decision by the General Assembly on convening the conference.**